

THE CASKS ARE COMING

Proposal for an investigate for a one-hour film

The international nuclear industry, now 50 years old, has yet to find a permanent burial place for its spent fuel. Popular resistance to the establishment of even short-term depositories has kept most spent fuel radiating in storage pools attached to the reactors that produced them. The lack of a permanent burial place is the main reason the nuclear industry is now held back from further expansion. Storage pools have a useful life span of only a decade or two.

A permanent burial place means a place that has the potential of preventing the leakage of fission material for half a million years. Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. is promoting the granite-covered Canadian Shield as having that capacity. With some financial backing from the U.S. and Japanese governments, AECL is operating an underground research centre at Whitehall, Manitoba, for the purpose of testing various disposal technologies.

But until recently, AECL was unsuccessful in finding a place in the Canadian Shield where local authorities would allow nuclear waste to be buried. Popular resistance forced it to halt explorations in northern Ontario in the early 1980s. And when the province of Manitoba allowed it to open its research station there in 1982, it was on condition that no spent fuel be buried.

But nuclear waste may have finally found a home in northern Saskatchewan, not far from where a lot of the world's uranium is mined in the first place. The Meadow Lake Band Council, representing 8,000 Crees and Assiniboines, decided in 1994 to investigate the use of its large share of the Canadian Shield by AECL in return for jobs and rental fees. It has promised to hold a referendum on the issue before drilling would begin.

That may be in 1996. The Canadian Environmental Protection Agency is scheduled this year to approve one of the disposal technologies tested at Whiteshell over the past 15 years, making AECL ready to select and prepare a site for disposal.

It could also be an important year for the nuclear industry in the U.S. First deliveries of spent fuel are scheduled to be made to a temporary disposal site at the Mescalero Apache reserve in New Mexico. The Mescalero Band Council has completed a \$1.7 billion deal with 33 private nuclear facilities for the use of Apache land over the next 40 years. These private utilities account for 75% of US nuclear power capacity.

Discussions have started between the Mescalero Apache Council and the Meadow Lake Council for transferring spent fuel from temporary storage in New Mexico to permanent storage in Saskatchewan. These discussions, attended by representatives of Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd., produced a document entitled "A Fully Privatized Spent Fuel Disposal System Opportunity". It reads:

There are many obstacles to this system, including an international boundary, but, in a post-free trade environment, an all-Indian designed and operated spent fuel management and disposal system would have great appeal...The potential exists for American utilities to exempt themselves from the US Nuclear Waste Policy Act. (The NWPA sets safety standards.)

So the future of the nuclear industry in North America may be determined this year. But it could become an explosive issue. In order for spent fuel to be safely transported, it needs to be installed in a cask with 30 tons of insulation, and then very visibly trucked at snail's pace along blocked highways. Transportation by air is out of the question because of the danger of radiating huge areas in case of a crash. An attempt was made in Germany once to transport a cask a few hundred kilometres, and it resulted in sections of the road being dismantled by terrified communities before the truck arrived. Residents had heard that even 30 tons of insulation could not guarantee that no radiation would leak. Germany still does not know what to do with its nuclear waste.

How are the 33 utilities in the U.S. going to avoid a similar debacle when their 30-ton casks start trucking across the highways this year? And how do the Mescalero Apaches propose to get the casks up to Meadow Lake? And how to the provinces of Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick propose to get the spent fuel of their nuclear reactors out to Saskatchewan? And what will happen to the nuclear industry if they don't?

In 1990, Magnus Isaccson made a film for the Film Board about uranium mining in Canada, exploring its implications for the environment and the people nearby. The time has come to make a film about elements of that uranium returning home in the form of spent fuel.

I would start researching the subject by interviewing representatives of the Canadian and US nuclear industries, residents of the areas affected in both New Mexico and Saskatchewan, and people involved in stopping nuclear waste disposal in other areas--Vermont (many Quebecers were involved), northern Ontario and Manitoba.

Here are some of the people I would try to see, to begin with:

In Quebec

Michel Fugère, expert on dry storage, Trois-Rivières
Walt and Phyllis Robbins, authors of "Getting the Shaft", Magog
Gordon Edwards, Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility,
Montreal

In Ontario

Archie Robertson, one of founding fathers of AECL, Deep River
Kristen Ostling, editor of Radioactive Inventory Project, Ottawa
Terry Graves and Bettina Miyata, activists in Georgian Bay area
Irene Kock, Nuclear Awareness Project, Toronto

In Manitoba

Egon Frech, AECL, White Hall
Anne Lindsay, organizer of Nuclear Waste Conference, Winnipeg

In Saskatchewan

Larry Christy, AECL, Saskatoon
Oneill Gladue, Meadow Lake Band Council
Bernhard Wiens, Minister of the Environment, Regina
Peter Prebble, Saskatchewan Environmental Society, Saskatoon
Maria Campbell, Métis author, Saskatoon
Gunther Wippel, witness of the German debacle, Saskatoon

In U.S.

Fred Peso, Mescalero Apache Tribal Council, New Mexico
Miller Hudson, Mescalero Apache Utility Initiative, New Mexico
Rufino Laws, Apache opponent, New Mexico
Dr. Micheo Kaku, nuclear physicist, New York University
Arjun Makhajani, Institute for Energy Research, Washington, D.C.

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